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Author(s): Leonard Schapiro

Source: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 40, No. 94 (Dec., 1961), pp. 148-167

Published by: the [Modern Humanities Research Association](#) and [University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4205328>

Accessed: 03/06/2014 00:24

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The Rôle of the Jews in the Russian Revolutionary Movement *

LEONARD SCHAPIRO

IN the late summer of 1903 Theodor Herzl paid a visit to Russia. Among those whom he saw was Count Witte, then minister of finance, who had the reputation of being at any rate more liberal than some of the emperor's ministers. The impression created by the massacres of Jews in Kishinyov and Gomel' was still fresh, and Witte was aware that the more reactionary ministers, notably the minister of the interior, Pleve, whom Herzl had also seen, scarcely concealed their belief that pogroms were a well merited retribution meted out by a supposedly loyal Russian people for the leading rôle which Jews were playing in the revolutionary movement. Witte duly pointed out to Herzl that while the Jews formed only seven million out of a total population of 136 million, about fifty per cent of the membership of the revolutionary parties was Jewish. Herzl then asked him whose fault this was. Witte replied: 'I think it is the fault of our government. The Jews are too oppressed'.¹ The views of Pleve and his like, who welcomed the pogroms as a diversion which might prevent the Russian population from avenging their grievances on the government, need not detain us. But Witte was honest enough in his belief that the Russian government policy of maintaining a large section of the population of the country in permanent subjection was disastrous, and his analysis of the motives of the Jewish revolutionaries, if somewhat over-simplified, can well serve as the starting point for our enquiry. Was the Jewish revolutionary in Russia primarily, or at all, impelled by a personal sense of grievance due to the oppression of the Jewish people living within the Russian empire?

The story of the Jew in the Russian revolutionary movement really only begins in the 1870s—indeed the Russian movement as a whole only began to take shape during this decade. So far as the Jews were concerned, the reasons were plain. Revolutionary movements are created by intellectuals, and until there existed a Jewish intelligentsia, sufficiently assimilated through knowledge of Russian language and conditions, there could be little question of the participation of Jews alongside Russians in the work of revolution. The emergence of such a Jewish intelligentsia was largely the result of the trend towards liberal

* A Lecture delivered before the Society for Jewish Study, London.

¹ *The Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, edited and translated with an introduction by Marvin Lowenthal, London, 1958, p. 395.

reforms which characterised the first decade of the reign of Alexander II from which the Jews also benefited. Although he had no immediate intention of allowing complete Jewish emancipation from the disabilities to which they were subjected, Alexander II was prepared to allow the emergence of a Jewish aristocracy of brain and wealth. By ending the system whereby Jews in Russian schools had hitherto been subjected to official proselytising pressure, he opened up the road from the ghettos to the universities, and hence to the professions. Moreover, Jewish university graduates and wealthier merchants were permitted to reside in the larger cities from which Jews had hitherto been excluded. The number of Jewish boys in the secondary schools increased from 1.25 per cent of the total number in 1853, to 13.2 per cent in 1873.² Jewish university students increased in proportion. Jewish youth rapidly began to absorb the current radical and revolutionary ideas which were agitating their Russian compatriots. Many of the future Jewish revolutionaries of the 1870s and after were to come from among them. But before dealing with them, two somewhat isolated figures must be mentioned, who belong to an earlier period, and whose outlook seems to throw some light on the main question—the 'Jewishness' of the Russian Jewish revolutionary.

One of them was Grigoriy Abramovich Perets, a baptised Jew, the son of a rich merchant, one of the three whose presence in St Petersburg was tolerated at the beginning of the 19th century. Perets, a fairly high government official, was the only Jewish member of the Decembrist movement. His sympathies lay with a minority group within the Decembrist movement, which was strongly influenced by the constitutional ideas of Western Europe. For the most part the Decembrists advocated distinctively Russian socialist ideas, but with a strong Jacobin tinge. Perets seems to have combined some consciousness of his Jewish origins with his admiration for western constitutionalism: he chose as the secret password for communication with his fellow conspirators the Hebrew word for freedom—*Heruth*—and is reported to have buttressed his arguments in favour of a constitutional régime in Russia with citations from the Old Testament. His participation in the Decembrist movement was unimportant, and short-lived. The other precursor was Nikolay Utin, another baptised Jew, also the son of a rich merchant, settled in St Petersburg. Utin took an active part in revolutionary activity among the students of St Petersburg University, and was a member of the first short-lived revolutionary organisation, which was founded in 1862. The following year he had to escape abroad, and the remainder of his revolutionary activity took place in exile, under the wing of Marx, in the First International. He was instrumental in creating a Russian Section in the First International, and is sometimes

² Louis Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia*, vol. I, *The Struggle for Emancipation*, Yale, 1944, p. 83.

referred to as the first Russian Marxist, somewhat inaccurately perhaps. His most important activity was his struggle inside the International, at the side of Marx, against the anarchist Bakunin, who together with the infamous Nechaev represented at the time the most extreme and violent trend in Russian revolutionary doctrine—incidentally drawing upon himself a good deal of anti-semitic abuse from these two worthies. Utin was perhaps no angel, when it came to political tactics; neither was Marx. But it is probably true to say that, like Marx himself in this period, he genuinely rallied to the defence of social-democratic principles against the Jacobin terroristic element which was never far below the surface in the incipient Russian revolutionary movement. These two rather isolated figures cannot, of course, be said to typify any peculiar features of Jewish revolutionaries. But it is of some interest that both these precursors should have looked to Western Europe for their inspiration, and turned their backs on the indigenous Russian form of Jacobinism.³

It was, it will be recalled, only during the 1870s that a real revolutionary movement came into being in Russia. It immediately attracted a large, though not disproportionately large, number of Jews. We are as yet dealing with the pre-Marxist stage in Russia, the populist or *narodnik* stage. The *narodnik* movement was an essentially indigenous Russian movement, and owed almost nothing directly to Western European influences. Its objective was a peasant uprising which would sweep away the hated tyranny and usher in an era of freedom. This faith of the *narodniki* was in part inspired by the long tradition of revolt which existed among the peasants; and in part by a belief that the Russian peasant was a socialist by instinct. Mingled with this faith was a passionate sense of guilt on the part of the intellectual *narodniki* because their own comparatively privileged position in society had only been inherited at the price of the suffering of the peasants, and the debt had to be repaid. There was an exalted nobility and sense of moral responsibility about the movement which has fired the imagination of the many who have written about it. It did not start as a terrorist movement, but more as a missionary movement. Thousands of young men and women threw up their university or other careers and went to the people, to live and work in the villages, or occasionally in the factories. Bitter disappointment awaited these idealists—both those who, under the influence of Bakunin were intent on stirring up the peasants to an immediate revolt, and the more moderate among them who made it their aim to train leaders among the peasants in readiness for the revolution of the future. The gulf between intellectuals and

³ On Perets see Ya. D. Baum, in *Katorga i Ssylka*, vol. 25, Moscow, 1926, pp. 97–128; on Utin see E. Tscherikower in *Historische Schriften fun Yivo*, vol. III, Vilna, 1939, at pp. 82–90 (in Yiddish).

peasants proved too great to bridge, and the peasants usually met their champions with indifference, or even hostility. Out of this disillusionment was born the revolutionary party, 'Land and Liberty', founded in 1876. One of its founders was a Jew, Mark Natanson. The seeds of discord were already inherent in this organisation: some of its members believed that the immediate aim should be the overthrow of the monarchy, by acts of terrorism and by conspiracy; others still regarded socialism as the main objective, and this they believed could only be achieved by a popular revolt carried out by the peasants themselves. Before long, in 1879, the party had split into two. One organisation, the 'People's Will' (or 'Freedom'—the Russian word is the same) now proceeded to plan the assassination of the emperor, which was eventually carried out on 1 March 1881; the other, which called itself 'Black Repartition', soon became the cradle of the Marxist movement.

Jewish revolutionaries participated at all stages and in all aspects of this movement. Let us look at this Jewish contribution to the first major phase of the Russian revolutionary movement: what were the measure and importance of this contribution? And secondly, to what extent, if at all was the contribution specifically Jewish in its nature, and activated by motives of a Jewish nature—as against motives which were common to all members of this distinctively Russian movement?

Statistics are perhaps not a very reliable guide in assessing the importance of the Jewish rôle. However, for what they are worth, the figures, prepared by the Russian authorities during the 1870s, and published after the revolution of 1917, on the number of Jewish revolutionaries participating in the movement at the time do not suggest that the number of Jews was disproportionate to the total number of Jews in Russia—in fact the percentage of revolutionaries up to 1877 remained roughly proportionate to the percentage of Jewish inhabitants within the Russian empire.⁴ (The figure rose sharply after the assassination of the emperor in 1881, and the pogroms which followed.) Turning to the more reliable evidence of the part which individual Jews actually played in the movement, we find Jews in positions of importance at all points—with one exception: there are no important Jewish ideologists of populism. It would have indeed been strange if there had been, since populism derived essentially from a tradition rooted in the mystique of Slav nationalism, which even the Jew, for all his great capacity for assimilation, would have found difficulty in absorbing. But ideological leadership apart, the Jewish contribution was very significant. The foundation of 'Land and Liberty' owed much to a Jew, Natanson, to whom reference has been made, and another Jew, Aaron Zundevich, played an important

⁴ N. I. Sidorov, 'Statisticheskkiye svedeniya o propagandistakh 70-kh godov v obrabotke III otdeleniya', in *Katorga i Sylka*, vol. 38, 1928, pp. 27–56.

part on its executive committee. There were Jewish propagandists, Jewish organisers, Jewish terrorists—a young Jewish woman, Hesia Helfmann, was among those sentenced to death for the assassination of Alexander, though the sentence was commuted on the grounds of her pregnancy. She died soon after the birth of her child. Several other Jewish terrorists paid with their lives. Most historians of the Jewish revolutionary movement in Russia have suggested that the Jewish part in actually carrying out acts of terrorism was conspicuously small, and have argued that this fact was due to some peculiar character of the Jew, which was ill adapted to bloodshed and the rôle of an assassin. The argument is unconvincing. Given sufficient emotional stress, the Jew is as capable of bloodshed and terrorism as anyone else. When Jews thronged into the party after 1881 the number of Jewish terrorists was very high. There were important Jewish terrorists, like Gershuni, for example, in the socialist revolutionary party which evolved during the present century as the heir of the 'People's Will'. For a very short period even the Jewish social democratic *Bund*, about which more will be said below, was prepared to countenance terrorism, under the impact of particularly brutal reprisals against Jewish workers by the Russian authorities. In more recent times one could cite the extensive Jewish participation in the savageries of the Red Terror of the *Cheka*—or even events in Palestine. The Jewish contribution to the Russian revolutionary movement was in many respects a noble one, so long as Jews tried to seek out the meeting point of what was best in Russian and in Jewish tradition. But nothing is to be gained by false nationalism. If it was true, as it probably was, that during the 1870s the Jewish revolutionary was to be found less often than his Russian comrades actually wielding bomb or revolver, this was due to the policy of the 'People's Will'. The act of terrorism was regarded as a demonstration of the people's wrath against tyranny and injustice. Obviously this demonstration was more likely to achieve its object if the terrorist was a Russian, and not a Jew, whose national motives could be suspected. Moreover the 'People's Will' was a very disciplined organisation, which strictly controlled the actions of its members. Again, a number of historians, of whom probably Lev Deych, himself an important Jewish participant in the revolutionary movement, was the first, have tended generally to minimise the importance of Jews in the movement. This tendency may have been due to the absence of Jewish names among the more dramatic figures of the movement; or more likely, to a natural desire to counteract the dishonest exaggeration of the rôle of the Jews in which the Russian authorities indulged for their own ulterior purposes. But now, since the researches of that great historian, Tschirikower, it is impossible to doubt the importance of the Jewish contribution to the less spectacular business of organisation and

staff-work. It was the Jews, with their long experience of exploiting conditions on Russia's western frontier which adjoined the Pale for smuggling and the like, who organised the illegal transport of literature, planned escapes and illegal crossings, and generally kept the wheels of the whole organisation running. A particularly important part was played by Zundelevich, who in 1872 had formed a revolutionary circle mainly among students of the state-sponsored rabbinical school, at Vilna.⁵ Vilna was also destined to become one of the main centres of social democracy when this movement swept Russia some fifteen or twenty years later.

And now, what were the motives of the Jewish revolutionaries in the 'People's Will'? It seems impossible to extract any specifically Jewish motives which actuated these revolutionaries, except in the most general and indirect sense: if liberty were achieved for the whole of Russia, the Jews among others would benefit. Indeed, the most striking feature of the Jew in the revolutionary movement at this period is the extent to which his whole mode of action and thought became assimilated to a specifically Russian form and tradition, even in some cases a Christian tradition. It would perhaps have been impossible for him to have acted otherwise, since the whole populist movement was steeped in Slav nationalism and peasant tradition. Even where propaganda activity was conducted among factory workers, the attitude towards them was not that of the social democrats, for whom the workers became a special privileged and progressive class. To the *narodnik* the worker was merely a peasant who happened to be in the factory, and the strike was merely an adjunct to the traditional village revolt. The Jewish populist had to turn his back on his Jewish tradition, and seems to have done so with very great readiness. Very many, especially the women, were baptised. No doubt in many cases baptism was merely a convenience in order to avoid restrictions on residence in the capital and other disabilities. But there were also instances of genuine conversion to the Orthodox Church where the Jewish revolutionary was drawn by his revolutionary faith in the people to embrace the traditional faith of the peasant, and became a devout Christian. However, Christianity played a comparatively small part in the faith of the movement as compared with the rationalist mystique which is usually described as 'nihilism', and which exercised such a large influence on the spiritual development of the Russian intelligentsia. The young Jewish intellectual found the wine of nihilism as intoxicating as his Russian counterpart—perhaps, after the somewhat sterile intellectual nourishment of confined Jewish life in Russia, even more so. Lev Deych describes how *yeshivah* students, hitherto almost fanatically absorbed in the minutiae

⁵ Tscharikower, *loc. cit.* pp. 152–72; N. A. Bukhbinder in *Istoriko-revolutsionnyy sbornik*, vol. I, edited by V. I. Nevsky, Moscow/Petrograd, 1924, pp. 37–66.

of scriptures and Talmud, would throw over the whole tradition in which they had hitherto lived after only two or three conversations with a nihilist.⁶ This may be an exaggeration. But of the fact that becoming a revolutionary involved a complete break with Jewish environment and tradition in the 1870s there is no doubt: the bulk of the Jewish population, including the great majority of the intellectual and commercial aristocracy, felt a loyal and hopeful devotion to Alexander II and it is not to be wondered at that Jewish families used sometimes to hold the ceremonial week of mourning (*Shivah*) when a son or daughter joined the revolutionaries.

Sometimes assimilation involved rather more than a mere break with Jewish tradition, and the Jewish revolutionary was faced with a direct conflict between the policy of the party and the interests of the Jewish people from whom he sprang. This occurred particularly forcibly for the first time in 1881 and immediately after, as a result of the anti-Jewish pogroms which followed after the assassination of Alexander. The attitude of the Russian populists to violent anti-semitism was, to say the least, ambivalent. They were not primarily anti-semitic. But since they identified themselves with all and every kind of peasant revolt, they were reluctant to restrain the anti-Jewish tendencies of the peasants, for fear of alienating their sympathies. They comforted their consciences with the rather specious arguments that all revolt in Russia had to start as anti-Jewish rioting before it could develop into a full scale revolution; and that in any case the popular fury was directed against Jewish shopkeepers and money-lenders and was therefore a respectable form of class war. This line of reasoning was applied as much by the terrorists as by the opponents of terrorism, who were now grouped together in the 'Black Repartition'. It is known, from documents which were only published years later, that a serious conflict arose in 1881 over the issue of anti-semitism between a leading member of 'Black Repartition', Pavel Aksel'rod, who was of course himself a Jew, and his colleagues, including his Jewish colleagues, among them Lev Deych. Axel'rod was disturbed by the policy of the populists towards the Jewish pogroms (the 'People's Will' had actually put out leaflets of an openly anti-Jewish nature) and wanted to publish a pamphlet explaining what the duties were of both Jews and revolutionaries on this issue. He was prevented from doing so by his colleagues, who, in the words of Deych, argued that to come out in support of the Jews was to risk alienating the support of the peasants. The Jewish question was, in his view, 'insoluble' so far as the revolutionary was concerned. Axel'rod's pamphlet remained unpublished, and indeed unfinished.⁷ It is perhaps of interest that whereas Axel'rod was

⁶ Lev Deych, *Rol' yevreyev v russkom revolyutsionnom dvizhenii*, vol. I., Berlin, n.d. pp. 30-1.

⁷ *Iz arkhiva P. B. Aksel'roda*, Berlin, 1924, pp. 31, 217-35, 215-6.

the son of poor Jewish parents who lived within the Pale, Deych came from a rich assimilated family in Kiev. Indeed, the Jewish question sometimes remained 'insoluble' even for the heirs of the *narodniks*, the socialist revolutionaries of the present century. Years later, for example in 1904, there is an echo of the arguments used in 1881 in the socialist revolutionary press, in answer to an appeal by the Jewish social-democratic *Bund* for armed support against those participating in anti-Jewish pogroms. How can we do so?—reply the socialist revolutionaries. 'After all, the main mass of the pogrom-makers will consist of those same destitute toilers whose interests socialists are pledged to defend. . . . Is it really to be expected that we, the socialists, should go forth and beat up our admittedly blinded brothers, but brothers all the same, hand in hand with the police? Or, at best, hand in hand with the Jewish bourgeoisie armed in the defence of its property?'⁸

It would be unfair to suggest that the socialist revolutionaries were anti-semitic as a general rule. Far from it. Indeed many instances could be quoted, from Jewish sources, which show how frequently the socialist revolutionaries did turn out, especially after 1905, in support of the organisations of self-defence against pogroms which the *Bund* was active in maintaining. As the tide of revolution mounted, anti-semitism became such an evident weapon of the reactionaries that revolutionaries no longer needed to be reticent in condemning it. But the instances cited show the kind of conflict that could and did arise when the Jewish revolutionary was required as part of his duty to sever completely all links with his Jewish past and tradition by embracing a nationalistic, Russian movement. The revolution of 1917 will show to what extent the Jew failed to assimilate into a nationalist Russian movement—which is what bolshevism first and foremost was. But first a glance is necessary at the development of social democracy inside Russia so far as it affected the Jewish revolutionary.

The rôle of the Jew in Russian social democracy was, of course, very much greater than it could ever be in the populist movement. There were certain obvious reasons for this. Marxism was from the outset an internationalist doctrine, and the Russian Jew, although he was capable of entering a purely Russian movement, and of sinking his national interest in what he believed was the more important general aim, nevertheless often retained sufficient sense of contact with his correligionists outside Russia to feel rather more at home in social democracy. Secondly, the appeal of Marxism to many Russians at the outset lay precisely in the fact that it turned its back on the somewhat reactionary traditionalism of the *narodnik* peasant movement, and offered a solution for Russia in line with developments in Western Europe—first capitalism and industrialisation, but thereafter also

⁸ Quoted from *Revolyutsionnaya Rossiya in Vestnik Bunda*, No 3, Geneva, June 1904, p. 22.

democratic freedom for the emancipated proletariat. It was after all to be some time before the 'democracy' of social democracy would be immolated on the altar of 'socialism'. Thirdly, Marxism attached special historical importance to the working class as the destined bearer of liberation. For the Jew, always rather more at home among the town workers than among the more backward, traditional and often anti-semitic Russian peasants, this was an important factor.

It was therefore not surprising that Jews should have figured as pioneers in bringing the light of Marxism from Western Europe into Russia. Outside Russia, Aksel'rod was next in importance to Plekhanov, if not equally important, as a theorist in the *émigré* Marxist group 'Liberation of Labour', which the heirs of 'Black Repartition' founded in Geneva in 1883. Inside Russia Jewish names abound among the pioneers who were busy creating social democratic groups and circles in the 1880s and 1890s. Jews worked indiscriminately among Jewish or Russian workers inside Russia, without any sense that their duty lay among the former rather than the latter. Indeed, the very internationalism of Marxism precluded any sense of nationalism in those early days: the proletariat was one, all were oppressed, and the liberation of all was the only solution for any particularly oppressed section. Jewish social democrats showed particular hostility towards the Zionists, who advocated an entirely different solution for Russian Jewry—if somewhat utopian, at that date.

It was therefore by accident rather than design that a Jewish revolutionary worked among Jewish workers instead of Russian workers. Take the case of the future leader of the menshevik wing of the party, Martov. It was due to the accident of having been exiled there that Martov made Vilna the centre of his social democratic activity, and in fact he was one of the main influences which led in 1897 to the founding of the General Jewish Workers' Union in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, usually known as the *Bund*. But before then, in 1895, Martov had returned to St Petersburg where he influenced Lenin to found the important Petersburg Union for the Liberation of Labour. For years after, at Lenin's side, Martov fought all attempts of the *Bund* to retain a measure of autonomy within the all-Russian party. Yet, ironically, it had been Martov, in his famous May Day speech of 1895, who had formulated the reasons why the Jews needed a separate Jewish social-democratic party: the Jews, he then argued, have certain special needs and demands, and there is always a risk that victorious social democracy faced, at any time, with the necessity of jettisoning some of its aims *might* be tempted to sacrifice those of specifically Jewish interest. The decision of the *Bund* to use Yiddish as the language of propaganda was also due to quite empirical reasons—it was the only language in which a mass Jewish audience could be reached. (It is interesting to recall in

this connection that when, in the 1870s, one of the pioneers of the Jewish revolutionary movement in Vilna, Lieberman, insisted on Hebrew as the language of propaganda, it was also for a practical and not nationalistic reason: Hebrew, he thought, was the best literary vehicle for training revolutionaries among Talmudic students. It was Lieberman, incidentally, who in Vienna, in 1877, founded a revolutionary newspaper *Haemeth*—the ‘Truth’—a distant ancestor, perhaps of Trotsky’s ‘Truth’, *Pravda*, from which Lenin borrowed the name for his paper in 1912.) Expediency, then, was at any rate the origin of the ‘nationalism’ of the *Bund*, as it would later be described by its opponents, and probably the main motive underlying the doctrine of national cultural autonomy for the Jews which the *Bund* ultimately evolved.

The question of nationalism becomes very material in considering the break between the *Bund* and the Russian party under Lenin’s leadership in 1903. But first attention must be drawn to the important influence which the *Bund* exercised over the Russian party in its formative years. Two instances must suffice. One was perhaps more of symbolic importance: the considerable part played by the *Bund* and the Jewish social democrats in Vilna in the organisation of the first congress of the All-Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in Minsk in 1898, a year after the foundation congress of the *Bund*. The main influence of the *Bund* went to the root of the whole conception of social democracy. According to the Western European conception, at any rate, Marxism pre-supposed the progressive development of social consciousness by the workers so that they could prepare themselves for their ultimate task of taking power from the bourgeoisie, who should historically precede them, the workers, in power. The *Bund* interpreted this to mean that the party should be broadly based on the active support of the workers in whose name it spoke. They believed that the workers, grouped in trade unions, should by learning to act as one man in defence of their interests in industrial disputes, demonstrations etc., grow into a mass party fit to seize the reins when the time came. It is, of course, common knowledge that Lenin’s theory of the party was very different—the party was to be a close-knit caste of intellectual professionals who would bring to the workers from the outside the social consciousness which they were otherwise incapable of developing by themselves. It is not in the present context material to decide who was right. But the fact remains that long before Lenin had succeeded in getting his ideas accepted, around 1901 or 1902, the *Bund* had succeeded in creating something resembling the mass party which its leaders advocated—within the area of the Pale of course—which was very different indeed from anything which the Russian committees had so far succeeded in creating. And in so doing the *Bund* spread its influence and example inside the Russian party. To take a concrete instance. The

decision taken after 1895, under Martov's influence (after he left Vilna in 1895) to try to reach a wider audience and to build up a mass party instead of, as hitherto, concentrating only on training up a few future leaders, was the direct result of experience in Vilna. The achievements of the Vilna organisation were embodied in a famous manuscript pamphlet of which one of the founders of the *Bund*, A. Kremer, was the author. This pamphlet remained for some years the Bible of most Russian social democrats.

The break between the Russian party and the *Bund* came in 1903, at the famous Second Congress, which was the origin of the division of the social democratic party into bolsheviks and mensheviks. It had to come, if Lenin was to remain master of the Russian party, if only because of the complete incompatibility of views between Lenin and the *Bund* on what should be the nature of the party. The *Bund* was easily outvoted because those Russian social democrats, who would within a very short time be loudly opposing Lenin for his dictatorial methods, sided with him at the congress in condemning the 'nationalism' of the *Bund*. But Lenin did not long remain master of the party, and indeed did not begin to regain anything like mastery until after the revolution of March 1917. Hence, when a large number of those who supported him at the congress later turned against him and repudiated his doctrine of the party which they had hitherto approved (or more accurately, not publicly disapproved), it was natural enough that they should move closer to the *Bund*. The general kinship between the *Bund* and the mensheviks, and indeed the prevalence of Jews among the menshevik leaders and their supporters, are both to be explained in this way. Besides, as already pointed out, it was often purely accidental circumstances which decided a Jewish social democrat to work among the Jewish proletariat within the Pale, or among Russian workers in one of the cities.

Were the members of the *Bund* nationalists in the sense in which their accusers used the word? In other words, were they Jews first and social democrats second? Lenin, and his supporters, many of whom were themselves Jews, argued in 1903 that the *Bund's* demand for autonomy in propaganda and organisation, even if coupled with acceptance of the overall party programme and of party discipline in all matters which did not affect the Jewish proletariat, was nationalism, and was inconsistent with Marxist internationalism. The *Bund* maintained that Lenin's group, *Iskra*, had set its heart on destroying the *Bund*. From the point of view of *Iskra*, which was determined to create a single disciplined party organisation, the existence within the districts inhabited by Jews of a Jewish social democratic organisation side by side with a Russian one, exercising the kind of autonomy of action which the *Bund* demanded, was indeed hardly acceptable. It is true that a similar situ-

ation had to be accepted in the Lettish or Polish parts of the empire. But then it could be argued that the Letts and Poles were nations with a distinct territory, and the Jews, who had no territory, were not. It is also fair to say that the Second Congress revealed none of those undertones of anti-semitism which were to become a recurrent feature of bolshevism in later years. Indeed, no one at the congress even quoted Marx's *Judenfrage* in support of the argument against the autonomy of the *Bund*, no doubt for fear that its outspoken and quite vulgar anti-semitism might prove out of place in a social democratic audience. Thus, the Master remained sacro-sanct, so far as Russian social democrats were concerned, and immune from criticism. The *Bund* later advanced the opinion that the views expressed in *Die Judenfrage* were out of date. But even Lenin himself, around the time of the Kishinyov pogroms, might well have hesitated to quote, say, Marx's opinion of the Jews as a kind of recurrent disease which bourgeois society generates from its own entrails, and which is only curable by revolution.

It was however true that *Iskra* committees had for some time before the congress been working to break up and absorb *Bund* organisations, and Lenin's correspondence shows that he had determined to force the *Bund* out into the wilderness some time before the decision was taken in 1903. There was thus little room for compromise. So far as nationalism was concerned, the bald charge made by Lenin was false, in the sense that the *Bund* never put national interests before social democratic interests. Nor did the *Bund* leaders, at all events, ever put forward any chauvinistic doctrine such as some special Jewish instinct or aptitude for social democracy. Bundists believed that the aims of social democracy were best achieved by a broadly based party, and such a broadly based party of Jewish workers could not be run by Lenin's professional revolutionaries. Moreover, such a party could not be maintained in existence unless certain specific adaptations were made to the general pattern which took account of a Yiddish-speaking, Jewish working mass. At this date, 1903, the *Bund* was still 'neutral' in its attitude to Jewish nationalism—concessions to it were regarded as necessary for purely practical, even temporary considerations. Complete assimilation was not excluded. Later, it is true, the *Bund* was to go rather further, and formulate concrete demands for national cultural autonomy, that is to say autonomy in cultural and communal matters appropriate to a nation which had no definite territory, but which claimed national distinctiveness. All this still lay ahead in 1903. But behind the theoretical debates in 1903 there was already a great deal of clash of temperament. The *Bund* may not have been nationalistic, but it was very conscious of the superiority of its own over the Russian organisation. It claimed, with some justice, that its organisation was much more democratic than the Russian. It had a tradition of mass worker action which

the squabbling Russian committees could not begin to equal, and it had reckoned its members in thousands at a time when the Russians could only be reckoned in tens. At the beginning of 1905, for example, on the eve of the revolutionary year, the entire Russian party (not, of course, the Poles or the Letts) numbered only 8,400; in the summer of the year before the *Bund*, representing the Jewish workers alone, could claim a membership of 23,000.⁹ The *Bund* could also claim that its leading cadres were not invariably intellectuals, but were also drawn from among the workers. This was to a large extent true. For example, of the thirteen delegates who met for the foundation congress of the *Bund* in 1897 only five were intellectuals, and the rest artisans or workers. Of the nine delegates who met the following year for the Russian Foundation Congress all but one were intellectuals—the delegate of the *Bund*. The *Bund* therefore could with some justification claim to be building the kind of party that the western interpretation of Marxism contemplated. It was certainly not the kind of party that Lenin wanted; but it carried a good deal of appeal for many of the more traditionalist Marxists who still remained inside the party. The *Bund* perhaps also indulged occasionally in displaying an understandable but none the less irritating consciousness of its own superiority. And nothing could be more calculated to infuriate not only many Russians, but even those Jews on Lenin's side who had thrown in their lot with the Russian party.

This first, and fatal quarrel, between the *Bund* and bolshevism was important because the factors which kept the two apart in 1903 were the same in many respects as those which in the years after the congress of 1903 kept so many social democrats apart from Lenin, and among them a great many Jewish mensheviks who could certainly not be accused of any nationalist hankerings. The history of the *Bund* after 1903 paralleled very closely in many respects the history of the mensheviks, precisely because each group was trying to assert and uphold the same kind of principles of social democracy which it believed were in danger of being destroyed by Lenin. The preponderance of Jews in the menshevik faction was certainly very great. For example, of all the delegates to the party congress in 1907 (at that date the party was nominally reunited) Jewish delegates numbered nearly 100, or about a third of all the delegates, if the 57 delegates of the *Bund* are included. Over a fifth of the delegates who followed the menshevik line were Jews, as against about a tenth of pro-bolshevik delegates.¹⁰ This can hardly have been accidental. But when one further considers that over a considerable period the *Bund* and the mensheviks shared the same outlook

⁹ *Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya*, vol. VIII, col. 98; *ibidem*, vol. XI, col. 531.

¹⁰ *Protokoly syezdov i konferentsiy vsesoyuznoy kommunisticheskoy partii (B). Pyatyy syezd RSDRP. May-iyun' 1907 g.* Pod redaktsiey Em. Yaroslavskogo. Second edition. Moscow, 1935. p. 659.

in many important respects on party policy, we are entitled to conclude that we are dealing in each case with an interpretation of Marxism which found a particularly responsive chord in Jewish tradition and temperament.

The revolutionary year, 1905, was the great watershed of policy for *Bund* and mensheviks alike. Throughout the year the *Bund* within its area, which was not of course of decisive importance, worked to increase the impetus of revolution by the organisation of trade unions, strikes and demonstrations, and within its limited scope, with success. So, of course, did the bolsheviks and the mensheviks. So did the progressive elements of the middle class, who probably played a bigger part in bringing about the concessions extracted from the autocracy in October 1905 than all the socialist parties put together. When the high hopes of 1905 were dashed by defeat and reaction, and the time came for the post mortem, *Bund* and mensheviks alike drew the conclusion that one of the causes of the failure had been that the workers' movement in Russia was very far from being an organised mass movement, responsive to its social democratic leadership. This they regarded as necessary before strikes and unrest could culminate in a complete overthrow of the autocracy, when the workers would take their place as a real force behind the middle-class democratic order which, according to doctrine must, as a first stage, replace the autocracy. Indeed the *Bund* could with justification claim that within its own, not admittedly very important or decisive, area, it had got very near to achieving something like a mass movement—there is no doubt that, with some exceptions, the strike movement was very much better controlled and organised by the *Bund* than by the Russian parties. After the inevitable reaction in which all social democratic organisations went through a period of extreme decline, a group of menshevik leaders who remained inside Russia now became convinced that their primary task was to utilise such opportunities as the semi-constitutional régime set up in 1906 offered, in order to build up all possible forms of mass worker activity, and thereby develop that worker consciousness upon which alone they thought the party could be based. They were for the most part Jews—though their ideological leader was a Russian, A. N. Potresov, once a close supporter of Lenin, but long since parted from him. It is not surprising that the *Bund* should have exercised a considerable influence on these mensheviks.

This group has been frequently referred to under the abusive label of 'liquidators' attached to them by Lenin, who accused them of wanting to liquidate the underground party. Lenin had drawn very different conclusions from the failure of 1905. He believed that the important task was to concentrate on building up the disciplined network of revolutionary leaders, who would direct the mass rather than carry out

its directions, or help it to achieve its own aims. Ironically enough both were right—each from a different point of view. For, in so far as any political party played a part in bringing about the collapse of the monarchy in March 1917 it was the ‘liquidators’, and many *Bundists* alongside of them: it was due at any rate in some measure to their activities in the so called War Industry Committees after 1915 that worker unrest culminated in a revolution and the setting up of the Petrograd Soviet, which symbolised government by the masses (or anarchy—depending on one’s point of view) at the critical first moment. So, what the ‘liquidators’ liquidated in the end was the Russian empire—which was not what Lenin had meant at all. But Lenin, on the other hand, in November 1917, proved that he had created the kind of organisation which could take government out of mass control and place it firmly under the control of his own party. So we are back again at the old question of what Marx really meant: should the impetus come from the workers themselves? Or should it, as Lenin said, be brought to them from the outside, by the professional revolutionaries?

But to return to the years after 1905. It is plain, in view of what happened in 1917, that the ‘liquidators’ were very far from being the kind of pacific evolutionists which Lenin usually accused them of being—indeed, had they been so they would hardly have won much support from the essentially revolutionary *Bundists*. They were merely thinking of a different kind of revolution from Lenin’s, though perhaps that was not realised at the time. Nor was it true that they wished to ‘liquidate’ every kind of illegal underground party—no social democrat in his senses in Russia at the time would have advocated this as an immediate practical measure. But it was true that they were heartily sick of the kind of party organisation which Lenin was engaged in creating around himself, with its conspiratorial intrigues, splits, unsavoury financial methods, and dishonest polemics against all those who disagreed with him. In fact, they wanted to create a new party organisation of their own, and they very nearly succeeded. This was the point on which the *Bund* stood much closer to those mensheviks, including their leader abroad, Martov, who were anxious at all costs to recreate a united party of all shades of opinion, including Lenin and the bolsheviks. In this effort at reunification the *Bund* played a very big part, and on a number of occasions took the initiative in trying to bring it about. It was a laudable and logical enough intention—why, after all, if one is a Marxist, should the party of the proletariat, which is agreed upon one and the same programme, be rent asunder by factional quarrels of a largely personal nature? From the point of view of the *Bund* there was a further motive: the *Bund* had been nominally readmitted to the nominally reunited party in 1906, on its own terms of autonomy. But until the reunion of the party became a reality, there

was little chance of the *Bund* playing its full part in the social democratic movement as a whole. Whether from the point of view of the future of the mensheviks these efforts at reunion benefited them more than Lenin, who was quite determined that there should be no reunion, is another question.

The *Bund* and the 'liquidators' seem to represent a fairly characteristic aspect of the revolutionary outlook of the Russian Jew—in marked contrast to the Jewish participants in the populist movement, in whom it is very difficult to discern any characteristic which distinguished them from Russians, or Poles, or other nationalities. It was an outlook which drew its inspiration from the social democratic movements of Western Europe, especially Germany, and there were good reasons why a Jew should have been drawn towards it. One was the instinctive attraction towards something which seemed to be very different from the traditional Russian ethos with its undertones of pogroms, reaction, obscurantism, and Slav chauvinism. It was probably this attraction of the western form of constitutionalism which drew so many Jews into the *Kadet* party. There, among the best elements of the Russian intelligentsia, the Jewish intellectual felt himself more than just an equal: he met men to whom, as Russians, Jewish emancipation was as dear as to the Jew who felt as alienated as any Jew from the Russian form of autocracy and reaction, and who realised that a people which kept a section of its population permanently deprived of rights could never itself hope to be free. The second reason which drew the Jew to this western pattern of social democracy was the sense that in an ultimate workers' republic which would emerge there could be no room for racial or other discrimination. This was perhaps a stronger motive in the case of the *Bundist* than in the case of many Jewish mensheviks, who often seem to have been very little conscious of their Jewish origin.

If these two motives, which were certainly present among Jewish revolutionaries, had been the only ones it is unlikely that there would have been many Jews in the ranks of the bolsheviks at all. There was however a third factor, which often proved much stronger than the other two. It has already been stressed that all Russian social democrats remained revolutionaries, not evolutionists. In this respect they contrasted with the majority of social democrats in Germany, for example, who no longer regarded a proletarian revolution as inevitable or even desirable. But conditions in Russia, where the semi-constitutional régime was always liable to relapse into police rule, were very different. It was not therefore surprising that many Jews should have been drawn into the bolshevik party, which certainly put revolution very much more in the forefront of its utterances, and which also provided the strong attraction which ruthlessness of method holds out to the impatient. And so it is not to be wondered at that we should find

quite a large number of Jews in the bolshevik ranks, though not so many as in the ranks of the mensheviks. When it comes to assessing their relative importance or influence before 1917 the position is not so easy. No one really could rank anywhere near Lenin in importance in any party which Lenin controlled. Trotsky was perhaps an exception—but only in the period after the revolution, when he at last threw in his lot with the bolsheviks. Among Lenin's lieutenants there were certainly a few Jews who mattered: Zinov'yev and Kamenev, who probably did more than anyone to help Lenin to keep the Russian social-democratic party disunited and to create the small but reliable nucleus of the future bolshevik party, were the two most important. But it could not be said that before 1917 Jews exercised any really decisive influence inside the bolshevik faction, and certainly nothing like the influence which they had among the mensheviks. In the history of social democratic ideology as a whole there are many Jewish figures of importance: Aksel'rod, Trotsky, Martov, and a whole host of lesser names—perhaps nine-tenths of the 'liquidators' so called, for example. But bolshevism, as it developed before the revolution, was essentially a Russian creation, and Lenin's creation at that, so much so that it is difficult to cite any name which should take its place beside his. So far as the work of organisation was concerned, at the lower levels, Jews played an enormous rôle in menshevism. In the building up of bolshevism their rôle was not unimportant, but in no way comparable. For example, the general staff of nine set up by Lenin in 1912 at Prague, which marked the real beginning of bolshevism as an independent revolutionary force, originally included two Jews, Zinov'yev, and Schwartzman, of Vilna. But only Zinov'yev played any significant part.

The position was very different after the revolution of 1917. Theoretically, if Jewish social democrats had been able to think out their fundamental principles and interest to their logical conclusion they would have worked to support a stable democratic government, to carry the war to conclusion, and to prevent the bolshevik coup d'état of November 1917. This was the position advocated by Potresov and Plekhanov, and it found some, but not much, support among mensheviks, and rather more in the *Bund*. But the times were confused, novel, bewildering and intoxicating, and little adapted to cool and logical judgment, let alone farsightedness. Thousands of Jews thronged to the bolsheviks, seeing in them the most determined champions of the revolution, and the most reliable internationalists. By the time the bolsheviks seized power, Jewish participation at the highest level of the party was far from insignificant. Five of the twenty-one full members of the Central Committee were Jews—among them Trotsky and Sverdlov, the real master of the small, but vital, secretarial apparatus of the party. In the first Council of People's Commissars there was, it is true, only one Jew,

but that one was Trotsky, who was now second only to Lenin, and ranked high above his other colleagues in influence. But Jews abounded at the lower levels of the party machinery—especially, in the *Cheka*, and its successors the GPU, the OGPU and the NKVD. (In the issue of *Pravda* for 20 December 1937 there is a list of 407 officials of the NKVD, decorated on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the *Cheka*. Forty-two of the names, or about eleven per cent, are Jews, and the actual total of Jews may well have been higher, since many of them may be supposed to have adopted Russian names. How many of these Jews survived the purge of 1938 is another matter.) It is difficult to suggest a satisfactory reason for the prevalence of Jews in the *Cheka*. It may be that having suffered at the hands of the former Russian authorities they wanted to seize the reins of real power in the new state for themselves. Many of the enemies of bolshevism, who tended to couple anti-bolshevism with anti-semitism, argued that bolshevism was a movement alien to true Russians and that it was a predominantly Jewish movement. The assertion was in fact untrue. In historical origin and in ideology bolshevism is an essentially Russian movement, traditional and nationalistic, with a very thin veneer of international socialism. But to the ordinary Russian in the early years of the revolution the argument was quite likely to appeal. For the most prominent and colourful figure after Lenin was Trotsky, in Petrograd the dominant and hated figure was Zinov'yev, while anyone who had the misfortune to fall into the hands of the *Cheka* stood a very good chance of finding himself confronted with and possibly shot by a Jewish investigator.

It was perhaps not surprising, in view of the very impulsiveness with which the Jewish socialist threw himself into bolshevism under the stress of revolutionary fervour, that his fate inside the movement should subsequently have proved so tragic. The history of bolshevism after the revolution is no part of this story. But one must recall the phases by which the Jews were edged out of their prominence as time advanced. There were, for example, many Jews on the left wing of the socialist revolutionary party who were drawn into an ill fated coalition with the bolsheviks in the very early stages of the bolshevik régime, and who six months later were fighting them in the streets of Moscow and Petrograd. The tragedy of the left socialist revolutionaries was that in their enthusiasm they accepted Lenin's demagoguery at its face value—they believed in his promises of a revolutionary war, of land for the peasants and of democratic freedoms because they wanted to believe in them. The partnership between these somewhat quixotic idealists and the hard-headed and often quite cynical bolsheviks was doomed from the start. It could not survive when once the essentially nationalist character of bolshevism was revealed by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, beneath the veneer of international phrases with which it had come to power.

Or again, take the elimination of Trotsky, Zinov'yev, Kamenev, and the countless Jewish bolsheviks who fell with them during the 1920s, and the great holocaust of Jewish bolsheviks which took place in 1937 and 1938. It is often said that these Jewish bolsheviks were Jews in name only, that they were completely assimilated, that they did not consider themselves Jews, and that indeed they were social democrats who would have repudiated, and often did indignantly repudiate, any 'bourgeois nationalist' leanings. This may be true—and yet it is hard to believe that such a high proportion of the victims of the aftermath of the revolution were Jews merely by accident. It is unlikely that conscious anti-semitism played a very big part, though it certainly played some. There is among Trotsky's papers in the Library of Harvard University an eye witness account of the campaign against Trotsky and his followers from which it is clear that Stalin's agents did not hesitate to exploit latent Russian anti-semitism when it suited them. But on the whole anti-semitism was too much discredited in the first years after the revolution for it to be used more than furtively. The real cause lay deeper.

It has already been suggested that bolshevism was essentially a national Russian, and not an international, movement. Several facts seem to support this view. In the first place, Lenin's doctrine derived quite as much from those traditional Jacobin elements in the Russian revolutionary movement as from Marx. It was necessarily these elements which came to the fore when once Lenin had turned his back on the Western European interpretation of Marxism in terms of a party based on a conscious and active democratically controlled workers' movement—the interpretation for which the *Bund* and most mensheviks stood. Again, the essence of Lenin's doctrine of organisation was centralisation, and centralisation could only mean, in Russian conditions, control from Moscow, and so long as Lenin was alive, control by Lenin. This of itself, without any conscious nationalism—and certainly Lenin at any rate was personally free from any pro-Russian chauvinism—necessarily tended to give a Russian character to the control which was exercised. The Georgian communists for example discovered this to their cost—although the persons actually responsible for imposing the Russian straightjacket on them were a Georgian, Ordzhonikidze, and a Pole, Dzerzhinsky. Thirdly, when once the decision was taken by Lenin in March 1918 to impose upon his party the peace of Brest-Litovsk in place of a 'revolutionary war' in the cause of world revolution, which had hitherto been avowed party policy, a blow was struck at internationalism. The cause of world revolution would not be abandoned—but henceforth Russia always came first. All these features became even more pronounced as time went on. It was against this bolshevik nationalism that the Jew collided, and by it

he was destroyed. The Russian Jewish revolutionary was as much the victim of the Russian revolution as its instigator. The revolution which he wanted to create was not the kind of revolution which in the end he helped to create. He was not of course alone—many of the best and bravest of the Russian revolutionaries suffered the same fate.

At the outset Witte's view was quoted that it was oppression which created the Jewish revolutionary. It is doubtful if this is the whole truth, though no doubt it was a part of the truth. In the main the Jewish revolutionary flung himself into the Russian movement fully convinced that in the brotherhood of international social democracy he could not possibly be anything other than an equal of the Russian, as indeed he was—outside the ranks of bolshevism. Once inside the bolshevik fold he readily jettisoned any claim to his national rights, for the most part only to perish in the end as a victim of a new kind of nationalism which he had not been able to foresee. Perhaps in the end the *Bund* was right in trying to allow for some national apartness, even if it ran counter to strict social-democratic theory. Of course the *Bund* failed—but it is perhaps better to fail with integrity, than to succeed—only to discover that one has succeeded in the wrong cause.